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Rehabilitating John Cassian: an evaluation of Prosper of Aquitaine's polemic against the 'Semipelagians'

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Abstract

Great strides have been made in the study of John Cassian over the last half-century, and yet persistent concerns are still expressed in regard to his theological competence. Invariably, the standard against which Cassian is found wanting is Augustinian orthodoxy. And there is nothing new in this: these concerns were first expressed by Cassian's contemporary, Prosper of Aquitaine, especially in his polemic *Contra collatorem*. Prosper is the harbinger of medieval Augustinianism and this makes his claims seem almost inevitable in retrospect – but as this analysis will demonstrate, his evaluation and denunciation of Cassian is systematically flawed. Close attention to Prosper's work reveals not only that his criticism of Cassian was ill-considered; it also shows that Prosper's own theological insight is less penetrating than one might have hoped to find in the 'first Augustinian'. The consequences for the study of Cassian, I suggest, are that Prosper's threadbare accusations no longer need to be entertained. But there is further significance in this finding: it is Prosper's polemic against Cassian that provides the categories that have regularly been used to evaluate the early reception of Augustinianism. If, as is shown in this paper, Prosper was an opportunistic controversialist who can be seen to have distorted, embellished and in some cases even fabricated his opponent's arguments, then we should be extremely reserved in using his polemic as the point of departure, not just for studying Cassian, but for studying the development of Augustinianism as a whole.

Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that the received account of how various parties in southern Gaul, in around the fifth to sixth centuries, responded to the works of Augustine is badly in need of revision; my point of departure for this argument will be a partial reassessment of the allegation that John Cassian was a 'Semipelagian'. Some progress has already been made in the re-evaluation of the theological ambient of Christian Gaul during the period under examination, but it has not been radical enough: the heady wine of controversy has left modern scholars with a hangover and even very sympathetic authors exhibit a strange compulsion in their research to

conform to a conceptual category that they explicitly disown.¹ My case for a more thorough-going re-evaluation of ‘Semipelagianism’ is based on a critique of a figure whose part in forming the received account has been too often ignored – Prosper of Aquitaine. Briefly, I will argue that Prosper’s polemical version of Gallic opposition to Augustine’s writings is based on a false theological dichotomy. In two letters and in a long treatise, Prosper makes the case that one must support either the heretic Pelagius or the catholic Augustine, and by implication that any criticism of Augustine is tantamount to an endorsement of Pelagius.

The reason for devoting so much attention to Cassian is quite simply that Cassian is the only author whose putative Antiaugustinianism is attacked by Prosper and whose purportedly Antiaugustinian treatise is extant, in the context of a much larger corpus. For this reason, in the case of Cassian we are able to assess Prosper’s claims with reference to the original document – something that is impossible in his polemics against Vincent of Lérins and his anonymous Genoese and Gallic opponents. Furthermore, the *Contra collatorem* is a valuable witness to Prosper’s case for Augustine since it provides descriptions of and commentary on the sort of events that Prosper describes only very vaguely in his letters. It is also particularly useful for our purpose because it is the longest and most detailed of his pro-Augustinian polemics. So, if it can be demonstrated that the *Contra collatorem* is unreliable due to programmatic distortion, we will have a strong case against accepting Prosper’s other claims in the absence of corroboration.

Prosper’s history of ‘Semipelagianism’

It is convenient to begin with É. Amann’s eminently Prosperian definition of ‘Semipelagianism’:

For us, Semipelagianism is essentially an exaggerated Antiaugustinianism which, rightly or wrongly fearing certain affirmations by the Doctor of Hippo about the divine ordering of human wills, about the distribution of heavenly assistance, [and] about the working of grace, tried to add to the work of salvation a part – more or less appreciable, even more or less exclusive – for human effort.²

¹ Two excellent studies, Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), exhibit this tendency; by contrast, Thomas A. Smith, *De gratia: Faustus of Riez’s Treatise on Grace and Its Place in the History of Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) is notably free of deference to traditional misgivings.

² É. Amann, ‘Semipélagianisme’, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 14[ii]. 1796–7.

These Antiaugustinians owe their name to the fact that, like Pelagians, they took exception to 'certain affirmations by the Doctor of Hippo'; for this reason, even if they did not endorse the full complement of Pelagian teachings, they were objectionably 'Semipelagian'.³ The eponymous controversy began c.428, when Prosper wrote a letter to a certain Rufinus, describing Gallic reactions to Augustine's writings; and ended in 529 with the Second Council of Orange. Our attention will be directed at the opening stages of this controversy, the most detailed sources for which were written by Prosper.

These sources are his letters to Rufinus and to Augustine; his *Answers to the Extracts of the Genoese*; his treatise *On God's grace, Against the Author of the Conferences*; his *Answers to the Gallic Objections*; his *Answers to the Vincentian Articles*; and his poem *De ingratiis* ('On the thankless ones', or 'On the graceless ones', or – better yet – both). The letters contain the best orientation towards the controversy; the poem reiterates Prosper's version of what was happening; and the other works are righteously indignant responses to perceived attacks against the writings of Augustine. Prosper's analysis of these events does not develop significantly, so it is possible to gain an accurate sense of his broad views from the letters. To these we now turn.

Prosper begins a letter to Rufinus by announcing that he intends to set Rufinus's mind at rest, 'lest malicious rumours, which cannot fail to reach your ears, should cause you fear and anxiety'.⁴ To this end, Prosper says he will explain everything – since Rufinus 'could not hear all the rumours

³ It should be noted that the term 'Semipelagiana' is an early modern coinage. The term first appears in the debates between the Jesuit Molina (in his *Concordia* (1589)) and the Dominican Bañez, and then in the *Congregationes de auxiliis* (held in Rome from 1590 to 1607). Other notable figures who weighed in on the discussion or otherwise propagated the term were Robert Bellarmine, SJ (*De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis* (1613)); Francisco Suarez, OP (*Operis de divina gratia tripartiti* (Lyons 1620)); Cornelius Jansen (*Augustinus: De haeresi Pelagiana* I.79–81; and cf. Innocent X's condemnation of five of Jansen's errors: Denzinger-Banwart, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, nn. 1092–1096); Jacques Sirmond, SJ (*Historia praedestiniana* (PL 53)); H. Noris, OSA (*Historia Pelagiana* (Petavius 1708)); and Le Nain de Tillemont (*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique des six premiers siècles* 14.157–88, 739–42 (Venice 1732)). By contrast, Prosper himself only once explicitly says of his opponents that they are propagating 'reliquae prauitatis Pelagianae' (*Ad Aug.* 7 (PL 51.72)), and never uses the term 'semipelagianus'. It is nevertheless clear that Prosper's polemic adumbrates the later debates to a remarkable extent, and even if the word 'Semipelagian' is lacking, the message is practically identical all the same.

⁴ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* prol. 1 (PL 51.77): 'ne quid maligni rumores, in quantum se auribus tuis subtrahere nequeunt, formidinis tibi aut anxietatis inferrent'.

my adversaries are spreading'.⁵ Prosper explains that the context of these troubles is the Catholic struggle against Pelagianism. He depicts himself as valiantly engaged in 'execrating' wrong opinions and the authors thereof,⁶ and notes that he has been becoming increasingly unpopular owing to his admiration for Augustine's works.⁷ No doubt, Prosper's abrasive style and clarity of vision contributed to his lack of popularity.

For instance, Prosper reduces Pelagianism to a single proposition, which he calls the 'subtlest and most nefarious seed of the other' blasphemies – namely, 'The grace of God is given according to human merit.'⁸ He warns that Pelagians are capable of 'disingenuously retaining [this proposition] in their bosom as they profess that the grace of God is necessary for man in beginning, advancing and persevering in the good'.⁹ The practical implication of Prosper's warning is that he can identify Pelagian taint in erstwhile Catholics – as indeed he does, with gusto, in his later polemics. Such behaviour was no doubt galling for his peers, and this may go a long way towards accounting for the acrimonious, if not always personally vindictive, tone of Prosper's campaign on Augustine's behalf.

In any case, Prosper reassures Rufinus that the wiles of the heretics are no match for God's champions; he alludes to the condemnations of Pelagianism by the sixteenth Council of Carthage (418) and by Pope Zosimus (418), and to Pelagius's evidently mendacious testimony at the Synod of Diospolis (c.415). But pride of place goes to Augustine.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Augustine's writings inspired backbiting amongst some known to Prosper: 'some of ours – it is to their great shame! – speak against him with hidden, but not unheard, whispers'.¹¹ These whispers sound strikingly like a potted modern introduction to the later writings of Augustine: 'And if they happen to find

⁵ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* prol. 1 (PL 51.77): 'quia non potuisti in totum quae ab adversantibus disseminantur audire'.

⁶ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* 18.19 (PL 51.88): 'nec nos perturbant, qui tales opiniones cum suis auctoribus execramur'.

⁷ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* prol. 1 (PL 51.77).

⁸ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* 1.2 (PL 51.77): 'Ex his tamen una est blasphemia, nequissimum et subtilissimum germen aliarum, qua dicunt "Gratiam Dei secundum merita hominum dari."'

⁹ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* 1.2 (PL 51.78): 'hoc apud se ingenio servaverunt, ut ad incipiendum, et ad proficiendum, et ad perseverandum in bono necessariam homini Dei gratiam profiterentur'.

¹⁰ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* 3.4 (PL 51.78–9): 'beatissimus quoque Augustinus, praecipua utique in hoc tempore portio Domini sacerdotum, copiose et pulchre, in multis voluminum disputationibus destruxit'.

¹¹ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* 3.4 (PL 51.79): 'quidam nostrorum (quod de ipsis multum dolendum est) occultis, sed non incognitis susurrationibus obloquantur'.

ears hateful and ready, they malign the writings of his by which the Pelagians' error was fought, claiming he totally displaced free will and preached a fatal necessity under the guise of grace. They even add that he wants us to believe there are two substances in the human race, and two natures. Thus the unholiness of pagans and Manichees is ascribed to a man of such holiness!¹²

Prosper invites Augustine's accusers to corroborate their accusations, but says that they are totally unwilling to do this because of the multitudes of Augustine's authoritative writings. So they go on 'bellyaching in private and deliberately keeping quiet in public', as he bluntly puts it.¹³ He then gives a detailed list of the scriptures that Augustine's opponents wrongly interpret and spends the rest of the letter offering correct interpretations.

In this letter, Prosper lays down a set of principles from which he never diverts and which become fixed points for scholarship for the next millennium and a half. The first is his assertion that his enemies are surreptitiously attacking Augustine. Even in his later writings, he repeatedly avers to whispering campaigns against Augustine. With Prosper's claims, these whispers pass over into documented history. Thus Prosper creates a suspicion of opposition to Augustine that characterises scholarly writings about Late Antique Gaul down to the modern period. Indeed, Prosper's version has that enviable feature of all good conspiracy theories: it is predicated on the assumption that the conspirators are clever enough not to leave any evidence; it flourishes on suspicion, rather than proof. Second, he claims that Pelagians are capable of dissembling by adopting other beliefs, but that by definition Pelagians believe that God's grace is given according to human merit. The corollary is that if a person can be shown to believe that God's grace is given according to human merit, that person is Pelagian regardless of whatever else he might (or might not) believe. Third, Prosper is well aware that a multilateral movement denounced Pelagius's teaching and its proponents, but he invariably attributes the Catholic success to Augustine.

¹² Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* 3.4 (PL 51.79): 'et prout sibi obnoxias aliquorum aures opportunasque repererint, scripta ejus, quibus error Pelagianorum impugnatur, infamant; dicentes eum liberum arbitrium penitus submovere, et sub gratiae nomine necessitatem praedicare fatalem. Adjicientes etiam, duas illum humani generis massas, et duas credi velle naturas: ut scilicet tantae pietatis viro paganorum et Manichaeorum ascribatur impietas.'

¹³ Prosper, *Ad Ruf.* 4.5 (PL 51.79–80): 'Sed quis nescit cur ista privatim de stomacho garriant, et publice de consilio conticescant? Volentes enim in sua justitia magis quam in Dei gratia gloriari, moleste ferunt quod his quae adversum excellentissimae auctoritatis virum, inter multas collationes asseruere, resistimus. Nec dubitant, si quam hinc moverint quaestionem, in qualibet frequentia sacerdotum, in qualibet congregatione populorum, centenis sibi beatissimi Augustini voluminibus obviandum.'

This is the first indication of the programmatic shift that characterises Prosper's version of the events. By the time he sets out to write against Cassian, he presents a starkly monochromatic picture – Augustine versus Pelagius. Fourth, a powerful emphasis on Augustine as the framer and defender of orthodoxy entails automatic hostility towards any perceived slight against Augustine – and this is precisely what we find with Prosper. As the controversy fires up, Prosper collapses any argument against predestination into an argument against Augustine, which he takes in turn as an argument for Pelagius. Conversely, any affirmation of human merit serves as grist for Prosper's mill – merit is Antiaugustinian, and therefore pro-Pelagian. The beauty of Prosper's analysis is its simplicity.

Prosper's letter to Augustine is basically similar to his letter to Rufinus, although he does add some important details. Prosper sets out to warn the African bishop that 'a number of the servants of Christ who live at Marseilles are of the opinion that what Your Holiness wrote, in your tracts against the Pelagian heresies about the call of the elect according to God's decree, is against the teaching of the Fathers and the faith of the Church'.¹⁴ He notes that these monks had assumed that the misunderstanding was theirs, and had even intended to submit their questions to Augustine personally (he will later mention Hilary of Arles by name as being one of them),¹⁵ but that when he himself had produced a copy of Augustine's *De correptione et gratia*, the community was divided. Those 'who already before followed the holy and apostolic doctrine which you teach' were won over, but those 'whose minds were held by the cloud of their own opinion' were intransigent. Prosper's concern in writing to Augustine is not least that the intransigent party have a dangerous influence over 'the simple faithful who revere those persons highly for their virtue, and who believe it is perfectly safe for them to admit what they hear from those whose lead they follow unquestioningly'.¹⁶

Prosper then summarises the beliefs of Augustine's opponents. They acknowledge the necessity of grace and insist that Christ's reconciliation is open to all. However, God has predestined for salvation those whom He foreknew would be worthy of their election. Thus, predestination depends upon foreknown merit. Even though they agree that predestination

¹⁴ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 2 (PL 51.67–8): 'Multi ergo servorum Christi qui in Massiliensi urbe consistunt, in sanctitatis tuae scriptis quae adversus Pelagianos haereticos condidisti, contrarium putant Patrum opinioni et ecclesiastico sensui quidquid in eis de vocatione electorum secundum Dei propositum disputasti.'

¹⁵ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 9 (PL 51.74).

¹⁶ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 2 (PL 51.69): 'deinde ne simpliciores quique, apud quos horum magna est de probitatis contemplatione reverentia, hoc tutissimum sibi aestiment, quod audiunt eos quorum auctoritatem sine iudicio sequuntur asserere'.

is chronologically prior to merit, they nevertheless maintain that merit is logically prior to predestination. They further insist that if it is taught that God's decree anticipates human will, the result will be that many people will cease to be diligent. They express concern that such a teaching 'sets up a fatal necessity' and advances the dangerous belief 'that the Lord has made men of different natures'. They are unswayed by Prosper's appeals to Augustine's arguments from scripture; they are unswayed by Prosper's own novel arguments that he has constructed 'after the example of [Augustine's] tracts'. They are, in a word, obstinate.¹⁷

Some of them actually fall into Pelagian errors, by affirming that grace means creation, that predestination operates on the basis of divinely foreknown merit and, in short, that 'the soul is able to move itself to virtue or to vice with equal facility'.¹⁸ Prosper describes the measures he has personally taken to counteract these beliefs, but acknowledges that his success has been limited because Augustine's opponents include men of personal sanctity and even some recently consecrated bishops.¹⁹ All the same, Prosper baldly accuses them of propagating 'small remainders of the Pelagian heresy'.²⁰ His own impotence to stop the spread of these beliefs motivates him to petition Augustine to write a tract for the benefit of all parties concerned.²¹ Augustine was obliging and sent a double tract in answer to Prosper's request (*De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseuerantiae*). The tract only succeeded in generating further trouble.

In Prosper's second letter, we read that the monastic establishment of Marseilles has been divided by the Antipelagian works of Augustine. He abstains from identifying the opponents, saying of Hilary merely that he is not certain whose side he will ultimately take. He does, however, offer a detailed account of the opponents' beliefs and he does not mince words in reaching his conclusion about said beliefs – they are heretically Pelagian. Quite apart from the obligatory gestures of respect he makes at the mention of Augustine's opponents, Prosper's trenchant identification of their teaching as

¹⁷ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 3 (PL 51.69–70): 'Removeri itaque omnem industriam, tollique virtutes, si Dei constitutio humanas praeveniat voluntates: et sub hoc praedestinationis nomine, fatalem quamdam induci necessitatem; aut diversarum naturarum dici Dominum conditorem, si nemo aliud possit esse quam factus est [...] Et cum contra eos scripta beatitudinis tuae validissimis et innumeris testimoniis divinarum Scripturarum instructa proferimus, ac, secundum formam disputationum tuarum, aliquid etiam ipsi quo concludantur astruimus.'

¹⁸ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 4 (PL 51.70): 'parique momento animum se vel ad vitia vel ad virtutes movere'.

¹⁹ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 7 (PL 51.72).

²⁰ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 7 (PL 51.72).

²¹ Prosper, *Ad Aug.* 8–9 (PL 51.73–4).

Pelagian heresy is a clear line in the sand. If ever he made a peaceful overture in hopes of reconciliation, it has been lost. All his surviving writings are bellicose. In fact, his treatise against Cassian is little short of slanderous. That verdict on Prosper's treatise is based on the five observations about the way he makes his case against Cassian.

Prosper's case against Cassian

The reasons Prosper's polemic against Cassian is unsatisfactory, and quite frankly often scurrilous, are as follows: (1) he bases his attack on the presumption that one must wholly support either Pelagius or Augustine, with no serious regard to the fact that the Pelagian controversy was multilateral; (2) he shows himself willing to suppress or distort clauses that would tend to complicate (if not invalidate) his portrayal of Cassian's thought as vitiated by concessions to Pelagianism; (3) he makes much of a highly dubious claim that Cassian introduces a distinction into mankind between those whose nature is unimpaired by the fall and those whose nature is thus impaired; (4) his assessment of Cassian is seriously compromised by its narrow focus on *Conference 13* to the exclusion of Cassian's previous writings, particularly in regard to Cassian's long-standing refutation of Pelagianism. The fifth characteristic is distasteful, but not obviously as significant as the others, although it deserves mention as well: Prosper assumes a self-aggrandising posture with respect to Cassian, veiled by protestations of personal insignificance and acclamations of Cassian's sanctity and learning. A desultory reading of the modern secondary literature suffices to demonstrate how common that hateful posture has become. The ability to sniff out inconsistencies in Cassian's writings is valued even amongst scholars well disposed towards him, despite that fact that it is rather like a talent for pointing out the nakedness of one's father.

It is now necessary to substantiate the aforementioned chief defects of the *Contra collatorem*. The first is that Prosper bases his attack on the presumption that one must wholly support either Pelagius or Augustine, with no regard at all to the fact that the Pelagian controversy was multilateral. In the second half of this paper, we will see that this claim can only be maintained against Cassian if one completely ignores his teaching about human will, which is regularly couched in aggressively Antipelagian terms. But another preliminary consideration points up the inaccuracy of Prosper's view: in his monograph *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals*, Robert F. Evans has convincingly shown that Pelagius's earliest squabbles were with Jerome²² – who happily

²² R. F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), 24–5.

reciprocated by attacking Pelagius. And we have already noted that Prosper himself knew perfectly well that at least one pope and one African council had condemned Pelagianism. Whether or not Prosper chalked all this up to Augustine, we should not be so foolish as to do so. Clearly, resistance to Pelagianism was widespread.

And yet Prosper states explicitly that he understands the Pelagian controversy to be a stark question of choosing between Pelagius and Augustine and then accuses Cassian of introducing a hybrid into the discussion, with the result that Cassian is unwelcome by both the orthodox and the heretics.²³ Prosper soon enough abandons the idea that Cassian's position is a *tertium quid*. As intriguing as it is to suggest that Cassian would be equally unwelcome with Catholics or Pelagians, it is more to Prosper's purpose to insist that Cassian is a crypto-Pelagian. His preferred technique for making Cassian out to be a crypto-Pelagian is the basis for our second charge against Prosper.

Second, Prosper shows himself willing to suppress or distort clauses that would tend to complicate (if not invalidate) his portrayal of Cassian's thought as vitiated by concessions to Pelagianism. One of the major ways Prosper distorts quotations from Cassian is by inserting into them the technical term *grace*. By this strategy, he has succeeded in persuading generations that the crucial standard against which Cassian's relationship to Pelagianism must be measured is Cassian's teaching of grace. We will see shortly that this is simply fatuous, for Cassian himself offers substantial evidence that the major threat posed by the Pelagians is bound up with their view of the human will. But for the moment, it is worth stressing that Prosper cannot justifiably insert the word 'grace' into Cassian's teaching and use that word as the pivot for his criticism of Cassian. A clarion example is found when Prosper berates Cassian for a supposed inconsistency in his teaching. Prosper cites *Conference* 13.3.5: 'The beginning not only of good works but also of good thoughts comes from God, who starts in us what is good and carries it out and brings it to its completion.' Then he glosses that passage as follows: 'You were right [at 13.3.5] in declaring that our salvation originates in grace, but now [at 13.9.5] you assert that it comes from the gifts of nature and from free will.'²⁴ The comparison is otiose, because Prosper has substituted a highly specific term for Cassian's far more ambiguous claim. In other cases, Prosper tinkers with passages from Cassian by offering an invidious paraphrase of his own that purportedly captures Cassian's meaning.²⁵

²³ Prosper, C coll 3.1 (PL 51.221–2).

²⁴ Prosper, C coll 4.2 (PL 51.224–5).

²⁵ See Prosper, C coll 5.3, 7.2 (PL 51.226–8, 230–1).

Prosper's habit of suppressing Cassian's words deserves further consideration. It is especially evident in Prosper's treatment of *Conference* 13.9.5. As was just mentioned, Prosper says that in that passage Cassian 'asserts that [our salvation] comes from the gifts of nature and from free will'. What Cassian in fact wrote in that passage is this: 'In order to see more clearly that at times the beginning of good will arises from the gifts of nature bestowed by the liberality of the Creator – a beginning however that cannot reach the perfection of virtue without the guidance of God's grace – we should listen to St Paul, who says, "For to will is present with me, but to accomplish that which is good, I find not" (Rom 7.18).' Prosper has elided Cassian's reference to 'the liberality of the Creator' – and he will do so again.²⁶ Had he not done so, he would have been obliged to offer a detailed argument for thinking that Cassian simply meant to refer to unaided nature. ('Unaided' is yet another term that Prosper delights in supplying to clarify Cassian's meaning.)²⁷

In these instances, the effect of Prosper's looseness with Cassian's words is quite simply to deepen superficial similarities between Cassian's teaching and Pelagianism. We can be utterly certain that Prosper aimed at assimilating Cassian to Pelagianism, because in one breathtaking case he actually glosses a phrase of Cassian's with two tenets of Pelagianism that had been formally condemned. In reference to *Conference* 13.12.5, where Cassian warns against 'referring all merits of the saints to God in such a manner as to ascribe to human nature nothing but what is evil and disorderly', Prosper attributes to Cassian the belief that 'the reason why we must be helped by God for some good works is that grace should make easier what we were already able to do by nature'.²⁸ This is a paraphrase of a sentiment that Augustine attributes to Pelagius and that was condemned by the Council of Carthage.²⁹ It is also a piece of sheer bravado. Prosper equates Cassian's warning against ascribing 'to human nature nothing but what is evil and disorderly' to the Pelagian tenets that 'grace is given in answer to our merits' and 'grace is not given to

²⁶ Cf. Prosper, *C coll* 5.3 (PL 51.226–8).

²⁷ See Prosper, *C coll* 10.3, 11.1, 14.1, 15.1 (PL 51.241–2, 252–3, 255–6).

²⁸ Prosper, *C coll* 11.2 (PL 51.243).

²⁹ Pelagius, *De lib arbap.* Augustine, *De grat Chr* 29.30 (PL 44.375): 'Item in eodem libro alio loco: «Ut quod per liberum,» inquit, «homines facere iubentur arbitrium, facilius possint implere per gratiam.» Tolle «facilius,» et non solum plenus, verum etiam sanus est sensus, si ita dicatur, «Ut quod per liberum homines facere iubentur arbitrium, possint implere per gratiam.» Cum autem «facilius» additur, adimpletio boni operis etiam sine Dei gratia posse fieri, tacita significatione suggeritur. Quem sensum redarguit qui dicit, Sine me nihil potestis facere.' See also Council of Carthage, canon 9 (ed. Denzinger-Bannwart, *Enchiridion symbolorum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1955), n. 105).

us for every individual good act'.³⁰ This is tendentious and unwarranted by any evidence.

The third point leads us to the only theologically clever observation Prosper makes as he plods through Cassian's *Conference*. Prosper makes much of a highly dubious claim that Cassian introduces a distinction into mankind between those whose nature is unimpaired by the fall and those whose nature is thus impaired. He introduces this claim in his efforts to wrangle with *Conference* 13.9.1:

Therefore, it is not easy for human reason to see in what manner the Lord gives to those who ask, is found by those who seek, opens to those who knock; and again is found by those who do not seek Him, shows Himself openly to those who did not look for Him; how 'All the day long He spreads His hands to a people who do not believe and who gainsay'; how He calls people who resist and are far from Him, how He draws them to salvation unwilling.

Prosper's gloss on that last passage is instructive: 'Many there are who come to grace without the help of grace and who have the desire of asking and seeking and knocking because of the alertness of their own free will; yet, the same free wills in other people are said to be so blinded in their aversion from God that no sermon can call them back unless they are drawn and guided by the power of God.'³¹ Thus, Prosper is attributing to Cassian the belief that, for the former, no intervening measures are required; whereas for the latter, operative grace in the robust Augustinian sense is needed.

He further argues that Cassian's putative scheme of the differentiated effects of the fall results in a fragmented ecclesiology. His point of departure is Cassian's statement that 'in our prayers we call the Lord not only our protector and saviour, but also our help and refuge'.³² With his wonted insensitivity to Cassian's precise words, Prosper stumbles through Cassian's writings by claiming that

according to this distinction of yours, there will be, you say, a new discrimination within the One Church: our Lord Jesus Christ (of whom Holy Scripture says, 'And you shall call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins', and also, 'For there is no other name under

³⁰ Prosper, *C coll* 11.2 (PL 51.243); see also Augustine, *De praed sanct* 2.3 (PL 44.961–2) and *De gest Pel* 14.30 (PL 44.338: 'gratiam Dei et adiutorium non ad singulos actus dari').

³¹ Prosper, *C coll* 2.4 (PL 51.220).

³² Cassian, *conl* 13.17.2 (CSEL 13.393): 'Inde est quod orantes non solum protectorem ac saluatorem, sed etiam adiutorem ac susceptorem dominum proclamamus.'

Heaven given to men whereby we must be saved') is not the Saviour of all Christians but of some only, and of others He is only the refuge.³³

Prosper makes his point by substituting a disjunction for Cassian's conjunction. So it is all the more churlish for Prosper to berate Cassian by writing, 'Nor may it be said, according to your novel division of the members of the Church, that Christ is the saviour of some and the helper of others – He is both saviour and helper of all the faithful all the world over!'³⁴ Prosper then returns to his own theological ruminations by dwelling a bit on how it is not illegitimate to praise those who have been blessed by God. Next he restates his conviction that 'divine grace helps by strengthening the human will'. These points would perhaps be relevant for a study of Prosper's theology for its own sake, but for our purposes what is significant is how relentlessly Prosper misrepresents Cassian.

The fourth and final point is that Prosper's assessment of Cassian is seriously compromised by its narrow focus on *Conference 13* to the exclusion of Cassian's previous writings, particularly in regard to Cassian's long-standing refutation of Pelagianism. Although in his summary of Cassian's teaching Prosper refers to 'what he writes and spreads in published tracts',³⁵ and perhaps alludes to Cassian's writings in warning Rufinus against 'the assertions they [sc., the Antiaugustinians] make in many a conference', Prosper gives no indication whatever that he knew anything other than *Conference 13*. But this is not surprising. Prosper's account is in essence reducible to a few propositions, and he would have had to have sacrificed that elegant simplicity if he had been thorough. However, taking on board more of Cassian's writings would have carried Prosper beyond well the modest knowledge of one's opponent required for polemic and no doubt would have been good for him. His own heated remarks against the unknown publishers of extracts from Augustine's writings show that he is sensitive to the danger of misrepresentation that is inherent in extracting. What is sauce for Augustine is surely sauce for Cassian. It can only be regarded as a failure of his principles that Prosper was content to offer decontextualised gobbets of Cassian while denouncing Augustine's opponents for taking his words out of context. And yet it is clear that Prosper's treatise against

³³ Prosper, *C coll* 18.2 (PL 51.263–4).

³⁴ Prosper, *C coll* 18.3 (PL 51.264–5).

³⁵ We may wonder about the plural. Does Prosper mean to refer to other writings of Cassian as well as *Conference 13*? If so, he opens himself up to a barrage of criticism along the lines advanced in this chapter. Briefly, the distortion of Cassian's thought advanced here by Prosper contradicts in many particulars the teaching advanced by Cassian in other parts of his writings.

Cassian is replete with extracts and offers no attempt at appreciating the context from which they are taken (one almost wants to write, 'from which they are ripped'). To borrow a phrase from a perceptive essay by Umberto Eco, Prosper's technique deprives Cassian's writings of 'the internal textual coherence' that 'controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader'.³⁶ Prosper was completely insensitive to the internal textual coherence of *Conference 13* and to the intertextual coherence of Cassian's writings as a whole. This is clearly seen from the fact that Prosper glibly accuses Cassian of propagating Pelagianism, while Cassian was demonstrably an outspoken critic of Pelagianism. We will take up that point momentarily. Some final words about the *Contra collatorem* are in order.

Prosper draws his treatise to a close *per recapitulationem sententiae*, offering twelve propositions excerpted from *Conference 13*. He is unreserved in his scathing introduction: they are 'dirty rivers [flowing] into a filthy gorge, which exhale an unwholesome fog'.³⁷ He then writes three more chapters to draw his polemic to a conclusion. The first contains a synthetic overview of Cassian's purported teaching. It is a seamless, interpretive account, and owing to its brevity it is suitable for full quotation here.³⁸ Here is *Contra collatorem 20*; for ease in evaluation, I supply inverted commas for direct quotations and italicise Prosper's interpolations:

This, then, is what our author teaches in these propositions, this is what he writes and spreads in published tracts:³⁹ when Adam sinned, his soul suffered no harm, and his free will by which he sinned remained unimpaired. The knowledge of what is good which he had been given he did not lose, nor could his descendants lose what he himself had not lost. 'Every soul possesses by its nature the seeds of the virtues planted there by a favour of the Creator.' With them any man is able, if he wishes, to anticipate the grace of God by the right use of his natural reason⁴⁰ and so to merit His help in order more easily to attain perfection. For one who has only the gifts he was given,

³⁶ U. Eco et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 65.

³⁷ Prosper, *C coll* 19.1 (PL 51.266): 'ad quae praecipitia pervematur his callibus, et in istam lutulentorum rivorum coenosam uliginem, cujus voraginis humor exsudet'.

³⁸ It should be noted that Prosper directly quotes two passages of Cassian, here without alteration, that he has regularly distorted elsewhere. This shows that he was certainly capable of making his case without recourse to manipulating the evidence, and therefore strengthens the supposition that he manipulated the evidence deliberately to further his case.

³⁹ Again we may wonder about the plural.

⁴⁰ This clause clarifies Prosper's critique. It does not correspond to anything I have been able to find in Cassian, relying as it does on a tacit opposition between God and nature.

and none of his own, is undeserving of any praise or merit. 'We must also beware lest we refer all the merits of the saints to God in such a manner as to seem to say that human nature cannot of itself do any good.' Its natural powers are so uninjured and healthy that it is able, without the help of God, to fight against the devil and to endure his every cruelty and even the most extreme torments.⁴¹ All men possess this by nature, but not all are willing to make use of their congenital virtues.⁴² But the goodness of the Creator towards all men is so great that He welcomes with praise those who come to Him of their own accord and draws others against their will when they resist; thus He is the helper of those who are willing and the Saviour of those who are unwilling. And since in the Church one section of the faithful are made just by grace, another by their own free will, those whom nature thus raises have more glory than they have whom grace liberated.⁴³ Free will in the descendants of Adam is able to do every good work as it was in Adam before he sinned.

Let us note that every passage of Cassian's that suggested to Prosper a hint of Pelagianism was taken as firm evidence for Cassian's heterodoxy. In numerous instances, Prosper shamelessly reworded excerpts from Cassian to make minimal resemblances into sturdy parallels. This is the foundation upon which he has built his interpretation of Cassian. It is a very doubtful way of proceeding. But his interpretation has provided the cues and categories that have been used to interpret Cassian ever since. One index of the influence Prosper has had is the fact that people still express doubts about whether Cassian's rebuttals of Pelagius were made in good faith.⁴⁴ But a fair reading of those rebuttals serves to corroborate this paper's specific finding that Prosper is an untrustworthy guide to Cassian's thought and its general conclusion

Like much of *C coll*, this claim is more valuable as a statement of Prosper's perception (or misperception!) of Cassian than as a presentation of Cassian.

⁴¹ This is a provocative overstatement of Cassian's position, since Cassian specified that God disbarred Satan from depriving Job of his reason and sense. The obvious implication is that Satan, if he wanted, could have done so. It is therefore completely inaccurate to attribute to Cassian the belief that people are naturally able 'to endure Satan's every cruelty'.

⁴² Once more, Prosper blurs Cassian's language. The relevant phrase used by Cassian – and correctly cited by Prosper above – is not 'congenital virtue' but 'the seeds of the virtues'.

⁴³ The introduction of ecclesiology into *Conference 13* is a device entirely of Prosper's own making. While it is legitimate to wonder, or even to conjecture, what role the church plays in Cassian's thought, there is no reason at all to endorse Prosper's hypothesis – particularly since it is aimed at damaging Cassian's prestige rather than clarifying Cassian's beliefs.

⁴⁴ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (1998), pp. 22–3.

that Prosper's wilful distortion of evidence in furtherance of his bias should make us think twice before accepting his version of contemporary events.

It is important to be clear on the reasons why Prosper's depiction of Cassian inspires no confidence. Prosper repeatedly takes liberties with *Conference 13* in order to make it say precisely what he insists it should not say. In doing so, Prosper shows himself to be a maladroit critic and his interpretation to be fundamentally objectionable. The depiction of *Conference 13* offered in *Contra collatorem* is a tissue of fabrications, misrepresentations, insertions and omissions. We have therefore found Prosper's account of Cassian to be deeply and systematically flawed. It is unreliable with respect to its historical value, misapplied in its episodes of theological insight and tendentious to the point of misrepresentation with respect to its interpretive value. A thorough re-evaluation of John Cassian that is not indebted to Prosper or his categories, either in part or in whole, is much needed.